

Sacrifice

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The practice of sacrifices is one of the oldest and most universal human institutions. It is closely connected with the equally universal religious phenomenon and the mythical thought. The explanation of its universality always represented an enigma and only recently became clear that its function resides in the social cohesion it guarantees. We may even admit that such a destructive practice originated most part of human cultural forms. A result of the substitution of spontaneous violence, sacrifice is a type of self-domestication, where agriculture, animal domestication and criminal law had their origins.

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The practice of sacrifices was, for thousands of years, the most invariable – probably the most invariable of them all – aspects of all human cultures. During that period of time, sacrifice was intimately related with religion and, in fact, the modern word “sacrifice” comes from the Latin word sacer, meaning sacred. It’s perfectly clear that sacrifice is coupled by religion and shares its universality.

Despite the ambiguities in the interpretation of fossil records, the presence of sacrifices in pre-historical societies is fairly well documented. It’s very possible that the practice of sacrifices existed in the Neanderthal man, and the sacrifice of animals seems unquestionable. Many of the pre-historical rock paintings depict what seem to be activities related with sacrifice. Its practice is more well documented from the Neolithic (around 10 000 B.C). In regions such as the Far and Middle East, temples of gigantic proportions were erected, which were sacrificial sites. In Ancient Egypt, slaves who would accompany the Pharaoh or other personalities in the afterlife were also sacrificed; in Mesopotamia, many animal species were also considered sacred and were sacrificed. In Phoenicia, in Cartago, in Crete, even in Greece, the human sacrifice is perfectly proved. In Rome, as late as 230 AD, human beings were being sacrificed, and the origins of the circus games are also known to be sacrificial. The habit of sacrificing several animal species (human beings and domesticated species, such as the bull, lambs or goats) existed among the Celtic. Where today is the Scandinavia, thieves, murderers and assassins were carefully picked to be sacrificed.

In India, in 2003 there were still human sacrifices, despite the legal prohibition. In China, in Polynesia, in Africa, sacrifices, in the form of human sacrifice and in the form of animal sacrifice, were a common practice up to very recently. We may even consider that human sacrifice was prior to the sacrifice of animals, given the account of the Bible (Genesis 22), where Abraham replaces the sacrifice of his son with the sacrifice of a sheep. In the last century before Christ, human sacrifice was officially banned in Rome. However, whether in the human form, whether in the animal form (and in the vegetal form as well), the fact is that all human societies have had in their pasts sacrifice as their central institution.

Another example of a society where sacrifice is particularly well documented is given by the Aztecs, such as they were found by the Spanish conquerors in the XVI century. The intensity with which human sacrifices were performed by the Aztecs is impressive – and repugnant - and it’s estimated that in a single year more than 20 000 people were sacrificed.

The Aztecs believed the profusion of blood and burning fires guaranteed the Sun continued to shine in its normal course. In the absence of sacrifice, the world would end. To avoid that end, the Aztecs maintained continuous wars with their neighbours, thus obtaining prisoners who, in the proper moment, were offered to the gods. An example of this was the sacrifice to the God Tezcatlipoca, which we will describe in some detail in order to illustrate a theory of sacrifice that will be presented further ahead.

The Festival of Tezcatlipoca had its prelude a year before the final sacrifice, by selecting a war prisoner gifted with remarkable physical features. He was the image of the God Tezcatlipoca. The individual incarnating the god learned all the Aztecs arts and habits. He was extremely well taken care of and all his wishes were met. He was paraded around and worshiped by the crowd, who called him "lord". His body was completely ornamented and taken to the King Moctezuma who offered him presents and treated him like a true god-king. Twenty days before the sacrifice, the "royal" ornaments were taken off; he was transformed into a war chief and was given four women (images of goddesses) with whom he married; during this period, the community engaged in multiple festivities. Finally, the former prisoner broke the flutes he used to play when he was 'acclaimed' by the crowd and was then taken to the sacrificial altar where he was killed; his heart ripped off and offered to the gods.

Such a generalized and institutionalized practice must have some explanation. A first major attempt was initiated by English anthropologists in the end of the XIX century, especially by Robertson Smith e James Frazer. To Smith, the purpose of the rite of sacrifice was to consume a collective totem, a consumption that would grant the perpetrators the (divine) force the totem supposedly had. Frazer added to this idea the hypothesis that the agrarian rites guaranteed general prosperity. On the other hand, Frazer identified the presence, in many societies, of the strange practice of sacrificing the king himself, who was seen more like a scapegoat of the community's own faults. One of the problems of Frazer's theory was precisely to harmonize the scapegoat aspect with the rites destined to assure the fecundity of the vegetation. .

A path different from the English anthropologists was followed by Emile Durkheim, who pointed out the insufficiencies of Frazer's theory, by noting it didn't explore an essential aspect in sacrifice, which is a destruction eventually leading to death, and only after that destruction there is a phase of consecration and communion, a phase where the community feels reborn. Therefore, Durkheim proposed the idea that only through sacrifice could a community feel as a whole and, thus, religion and sacrifice were ways to guarantee the social order.

Developing this idea, Durkheim tried to show that practically every human cultural institution has its roots in religion and in sacrifice. For instance, criminal law (starting with capital punishment) is rooted in ritual sacrifice. Durkheim started a debate which focused on the historical and conceptual precedence of myth and sacrifice. After a period when most anthropologists and ethnologists were arguing in favour of the precedence of sacrifice over myth, the opposite position gained supporters among authors who based their work in the work of Marcel Mauss.

Particularly influent was the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss who, privileging the narratives of myths, emptied the practice of sacrifice from any real function. In his point of view, the rite would follow the inverse direction of mythical thought. While the myth goes from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, the rite would return to the undifferentiated, because the rite "is no more than a disease of the thought". This position, with smaller or bigger differences, has been sustained by

structuralist anthropologists who continue to be inspired in Lévi-Strauss's work. Please see the entry about myth for a better understanding of this point.

However, the facts didn't cease to show how problematic is the structuralist view and how unsatisfactory are the theories that relegate sacrifice and the religious phenomenon in archaic societies as forms of «communication» with the gods, a form of «feeding from their power» or even to a kind of curiosity the so called primitive people felt for the «mysteries of the universe». Another anthropologist, Arthur M. Hocart showed how those theories gave no contribution for the understanding of the institution of sacrifice, mainly because, as James Frazer had also observed, sacrifice is the rite from which all other rites are originated and which, in its typical form, consists of the sacrifice of the individual called «the king» in primitive societies. Hocart showed that the king only became king when he died as sacrificial victim, that the «first kings were dead kings» and that human sacrifice is the matrix of all subsequent rites. In particular, royalty and, thus, the political institution, had its origins in human sacrifice. .

Only in 1972 was possible to articulate some of the fundamental intuitions of Frazer, Durkheim and Hocart, with what is undoubtedly the most systematic explanation of the universal institution that is sacrifice. It is when René Girard publishes *La violence et le sacré*, whose first chapter, 'Le sacrifice' shows the aim of his book. Sacrifice is a specific institution that acquires its meaning and function in small archaic communities where there was no institutionalized procedure capable of containing the violence between the members of the group, threatening its survival.

The fundamental distinction that allows understanding the emergence of sacrifice as an institution lies in the difference between spontaneous violence and ritualized violence. The first one is the reciprocal violence of reprisal which, started in any pair of individuals, can spread throughout the community. Violence is contagious: it has no mechanism to stop itself. Sacrifice is precisely the mediation institution that seeks to block the spread of spontaneous violence. Sacrifice is a new form of violence, a way to contain violence through violence. In the ritual of sacrifice, the community expels its own violence by directing it towards a third party, the sacrificed object. In that exterior object is concentrated, exteriorized and freed a violence that is no longer the violence between opponent members of the community. In other words, in primitive archaic societies, where there was no judicial or criminal law, ritual violence was the only way to contain violence. As we will see, sacrificial violence substitutes an original violence.

Although sacrifice is understood as a ritualization of violence, the passage from spontaneous violence to sacrificial violence is not so easy to grasp. Girard's key idea was a hypothesis about the origins of human culture which would constitute the mediator mechanism, explaining the passage from purely destructive violence to beneficial violence. Such mechanism is the reason why, because of certain biological factors, reciprocal violence between members of the community is necessarily substituted by the violence of all those individuals against a single individual who is murdered. That individual is the original expiatory victim, simultaneously considered by the community as the cause of the escalating violence, and as the responsible for the order that followed his death. His death left the community without enemies and his disappearance, his expulsion, necessarily brings peace. The original dead gathers seemingly contradictory proprieties, simultaneously evil and redeeming, for he has simultaneously caused social order and disorder. In short, social peace finds its origin in a spontaneous sacrifice (a lynching) that replaces the original violence of all against all.

Ritual sacrifice is a second substitution. As Girard says, «sacrifice is the imperfect imitation of spontaneous violence». The community is going to repeat the original redeeming spontaneous sacrifice, seeking to replicate the beneficial effects that miraculously appeared after the original sacrificial crisis. There will be substitute deaths. Instead of spontaneous, they are performed in the context of intentional practices increasingly ritualized. In each sacrifice, the community relives the original crisis and relives the source of life henceforth represented by the original death. Each sacrifice has a cathartic effect and it's possible that, as institution, it will have a millenary historical evolution, where the most ritualized aspects become more preponderant.

In its early stage, sacrificial violence was very close to the intense cathartic effects of the original murderous violence, after which the intensity of violence decreased to near extinction in rituals where only the aspects of collective communion remain (collective and festive sharing of meals, for example).

A phase, possibly intermediate, in the evolution of sacrifice as institution can be exemplified by the Aztec sacrifice described earlier. Let us recall its structure. The sacrificed individual is a war prisoner, thus, someone who doesn't belong to the community. This is a common trait in innumerable sacrifices: the sacrificed people were foreigners, slaves, children, virgins, orphans, crippled. In every case, the sacrificed is someone who cannot revenge or fight back. Secondly, the prisoner is somehow «internalized», «acculturated» and turns into a member of the community, learning several Aztec cultural practices. The future sacrificed must be different and at the same time identical enough. Thirdly, according to the strict temporal order of events, he is treated like a kind of living god, parallel to the «real» king Moctezuma, a point to which we will return. Fourthly, twenty days before his sacrifice, there is a process of cultural dissolution, culminating with the destruction of the flutes, right before the sacrifice. Finally, the individual is killed. But the dead individual is «the image of the god», that is, the origin was the death of an individual who, by being killed, became a god.

The Aztec sacrifice can be compared with countless sacrifice rites quite common in Africa and which possess a similar structure, although revealing a previous stage of this institution. In these rites, it is clearer how the individual destined to be sacrifice was in fact a king, while in the Aztec ritual there is an anti-king opposed to the real king. In other words, in the Aztecs, the political power has already emerged from the phase where the «authentic» kings were in fact the sacrificed individuals and who, just like in the first time, saved the community from its death. In addition, if divine monarchy is originated in sacrifice, the Aztec example also shows this is the case of wars, since it's widely known that the purpose of the unending wars waged by the Aztecs was to capture prisoners for the mass sacrifices.

Thus, an hypothesis: sacrifice is the origin of the entire human culture. If it is the case of political power, if it's probably the case of hunting, it's also very likely to be the case of agriculture and animal domestication. These two last examples take us back to that crucial historical time of transition to the Neolithic, and from there to sedentarization and the progressive emergence of urban life. Today, it's clear how cities have developed from cult temples due to religious reasons, rooted in sacrificial practices. The analysis of the time of construction of gigantic temples such as Gobekli Tepe, in Anatolia, shows this construction began before the origins of agriculture in that region; therefore, agriculture appeared in order to satisfy the needs of the large number of workers who, for many generations, participated in the construction of the temple. The origins of the agricultural revolution were the needs of the men who had to join efforts to build monumental temples. The very idea of planting seeds in the ground was probably originated in the resurrection that always accompanies sacrifice.

Another example of the cultural creativity of sacrifice can be found in the domestication of animals. Just like in the case of agriculture, this practice was not founded in the economical advantages it could bring.

Such as the passage to sedentarism based on agriculture meant a considerable decrease in the standard of living of the hunter-gatherers, so also the domestication of animals meant an exposition of man to all sorts of viruses.

Animal domestication requires a continued activity throughout many years and cannot have been carried out hoping that, some generations later, there would always be fresh meat ready to be cooked. The most plausible explanation lies on the substitution practices always associated with sacrifice. Man began having wild animals around him, «humanizing» them in a very similar way to the «acculturation» imposed by the Aztecs to their future victims. Humanized animals became sacrificial victims of substitution and domestication was an unintentional consequence of the ritual purpose originally sought.

These examples show the evolution of the cultural fecundity of a negative practice such as sacrifice. Placing sacrifice as the foundation of human culture, it's easy to acknowledge how right was Durkheim's intuition about the role of ritualized human sacrifice in the origins of law. One institution follows the other and they are both grounded in the death of an expiatory victim. In its most recent historical phases, sacrifice has allowed the emergence of the many practices associated with exchange and gift, so typical of Polynesian societies. Closer to us, it's possible to prove how the currency and taxes appeared in ancient Greece because of the religious practice of sacrifice. These examples show how deeply human culture is rooted in religion.

Finally, there is the controversy, created in the ambiguity the word 'sacrifice' acquired in western culture, about the meaning of sacrifice in Christian tradition. To some anthropologists, the sacrifice of Christ was another myth analogous to the sacrifices described in pagan rituals. To others, the death of Christ was a singular event that interrupted the sacrificial logic founder of archaic societies. In a strictly Christian perspective, Jesus Christ sacrificed himself in the cross out of love for mankind, wishing to inaugurate an order that would definitely end the previous bloody sacrifices. Through his sacrifice, Jesus Christ wanted to redeem all mankind of the crimes committed by men to guarantee social order. Christianity places the themes of universal identity and the innocence of all victims as fundamental horizons for the human species. Due to its progressive historical influence, Christianity set the value of the human person as a supreme value and gave a decisive contribution to make any form of sacrifice unacceptable. The protection of victims, of the unfairly condemned, of the economically deprived, of all those of who are victims of any kind of discrimination, become the fundamental value, the nuclear human right. It is the appearance of human rights, condemning all sacrifices, which became our absolute referential of civilization.